



Quarterly Report
BANGLADESH: STRENGTHENING COOPERATION BETWEEN POLITICAL
PARTIES IN PARLIAMENT
USAID Grant #388-A-00-99-00027-00
Project dates: June 1, 1999 to September 30, 2000

I. SUMMARY

Following popular protests against the military government, Bangladeshis re-established democratic development in their country in 1991. Since then, they have taken significant steps toward strengthening their country's governing institutions. Unfortunately, as in many other democracies in transition, Bangladeshis continue to struggle to improve the quality of governance. A lack of institutional mechanisms that encourage citizen input in the legislative process, encourage confidence in election processes and promote cooperation among the political parties in parliament impedes democratic advances.

In an effort to assist Bangladeshis in addressing these challenges, the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI), opened an office in Dhaka in July 1999 to continue building upon past efforts to strengthen the parliamentary process in Bangladesh. During this quarter, NDI: 1) hired an experienced field representative skilled in legislative and advocacy techniques to direct the three-year program; 2) introduced and discussed its program plans with political party leaders, international organizations, and local NGOs and civic leaders; 3) secured a pass to view a plenary session of Parliament and badges to observe a local election; 4) met with top party leaders and Prime Minister Hasina; 5) co-sponsored a round table discussion; 6) helped facilitate a reception hosted by the Australian High Commissioner for the participants who went to Australia; and 7) held meetings with civil society leaders and organizations to discuss their program efforts.

II. BACKGROUND

Since 1991, when Bangladesh held multiparty elections that were broadly accepted by all political parties, Bangladeshis have struggled to develop an independent legislature that is effective and accountable. Unfortunately, a legacy of mistrust between the major political parties continues to plague Bangladeshi politics. Rather than working within the parliament to resolve differences, political parties tend to boycott parliamentary proceedings and hold street

demonstrations that greatly limit the effectiveness of the country's democratic government. Recently, opposition parties have called for the current government to resign immediately and hold early elections.

Regular impasses between the parties and a weak parliament threaten Bangladesh's democratic development, and its future development depends on an increase in the role parliament plays in resolving disagreements among the political parties. The strengthening of the parliament requires concrete legislative reforms and an increase in citizens' involvement in the parliamentary process. Many Bangladeshi political party members, government officials, civil society representatives and media members are committed to improving the quality of governance in their country and have asked NDI for its continued assistance.

A. Civil Society Organizations' Role in the Political Process

Civil society organizations (CSOs), including nongovernmental, media and professional organizations, in Bangladesh are often better organized and operated than similar types of organizations around the world. Media groups, for instance, successfully prompted the government to revise its land distribution policies by printing a number of articles accusing the government of corruption. In addition, CSO members have conducted studies that identify social problems in the country and make recommendations on how the government could address these issues. Unfortunately, CSOs have rarely cooperated with one another to pressure the government to address citizens' needs or consider their research findings while drafting legislation. When these civil society groups do attempt to advocate citizens' issues within the parliament, their efforts are mostly misdirected due to the representatives' unfamiliarity with open and inclusive parliamentary procedures, such as committee hearings and testimonies.

Bangladeshi CSOs are often well-staffed and experienced in conducting research on public policy issues relevant to parliamentary committee members. Conversely, committees are short-staffed, with members lacking many of the skills essential to proposing new laws and commenting on pending legislation. As the legislative process is still quasi-closed, members of parliament are underutilizing the wealth of free resources available to them from civil society. CSOs could be called upon by parliamentarians to supply the committees with information during the law drafting process. By increasing coordination between civil society groups and committees, members will gain the resources and essential knowledge needed to act as legislators, and Bangladeshi citizens will be able to provide input into the law drafting process.

B. The Electoral Process

Despite some complaints, Bangladesh's 1991 parliamentary elections were perceived to be fair, with the political parties accepting the poll results. The second of the two 1996 elections were seen by international election observers and a local monitoring group, the Free and Fair Elections Monitoring Alliance (FEMA) as the "cleanest" and most trouble free in Bangladesh's political history. NDI found, during its election observation mission in 1996, that less than 1 percent of the polling stations suffered serious disturbances that required re-polling. Despite the findings from international observers, the Bangladeshi political parties alleged intimidation,

ballot stuffing and government rigging, thereby tainting the 1996 election results. Following the election, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party demanded re-polling in 111 out of the 300 constituencies. Furthermore, Bangladeshi political leaders and CSO activists have pointed out problems in the electoral laws that they claim deter a smooth election process.

The next parliamentary elections in Bangladesh will be held by mid-October 2001. However, early elections may be called. Continued international involvement in Bangladesh's elections would demonstrate international support for, and commitment to, a transparent and fair electoral process. International assistance would also ensure that the election is conducted in a free and fair manner, adding legitimacy to the election outcome and to the next legislature.

C. Political Parties and the Parliamentary Process

The lack of cooperation among the political parties has often been cited as the chief impediment to the functioning of the legislature in Bangladesh. Rather than using the parliamentary process to resolve party differences, political party members tend to use street agitation and the threat of violence to advance their political agendas. Within the parliament, the parties generally do not consult on important policy decisions, and significant bills have been adopted while the opposition has not participated in parliament. While in session, some members of parliament have used abusive language to make personal attacks against members of opposing parties, thereby limiting the productive discourse needed for policymaking. In addition, members of opposition parties have complained that the speaker does not give the opposition enough time in parliament to present issues of concern to their parties. If the parliament continues to fail to address social and economic problems and to govern effectively, the Bangladeshi citizenry may lose confidence in the country's political process.

III. PROGRAM ACTIVITIES

NDI began the quarter by hiring James Oliver, an experienced field representative skilled in legislative and advocacy techniques, to direct the three-year program aiming to strengthen the national parliament and improve parliamentary functioning by supporting cooperation between political parties. Since his arrival to Bangladesh in late July, Mr. Oliver and NDI staff have had several consultations with both the USAID mission and the United States Embassy and with local and international organizations working in the area of governance, and with political party leaders and local civic leaders, about NDI's programs and plans, which have received positive responses and promises of support and collaboration.

NDI managed to secure a pass to view a plenary session of Parliament, an ID for staff to observe a local election, and a letter of support and introduction from the Speaker's Office to help facilitate with the implementation of the programs. NDI also managed to meet with Prime Minister Hasina, Chairperson of the Bangladesh National Party (BNP) Khaleda Zia, Chairman of the Jatiya Party H.M. Ershad, and Chairman of the Jamate-E-Islami Party, Mr. Nizami, where Jim Oliver presented an outline of NDI's Program and ideas were exchanged. All leaders expressed confidence and support for NDI's programs. The meeting was picked up by the media and even broadcasted over television.

Both NDI and FEMA co-sponsored a round-table discussion on July 27 titled, “Meeting on Advocacy for Effective and Accountable Parliament: the role of Civil Society.” The lively discussion was attended by groups from ten different organizations, who presented their advocacy plans and the problems they foresee in instituting effective reforms. As a result of this meeting, both NDI and FEMA are planning a follow-up workshop on this same agenda.

NDI also helped facilitate a reception hosted by the Australian High Commission (AHC) for those who participated in the NDI/AHC sponsored trip to Australia. The Awami League and opposition party representatives made presentations, along with High commissioner Robert Flynn and NDI staff Johan Hamels. Both Government and opposition representatives had positive comments to make about the learning experience in Australia; although during their presentation they did criticize each other. Managing to get the parties in the same room together, however, was an achievement in itself. Both Government and opposition representatives had positive comments to make about the learning experience in Australia that NDI and the AHC had co-sponsored.

NDI held meetings with civil society leaders and organizations to discuss their program efforts, NDI’s proposed program, and ways to cooperate. NDI held three separate meetings with FEMA leaders to discuss strategies, workshops, and how to complement each other’s efforts. NDI Bangladesh held other meetings with the same agenda with BRAC, Democracy Watch and two local newspaper editors. In addition, both NDI and FEMA successfully managed to hold a lively round-table discussion with ten organizations that focused on advocacy for effective and accountable parliament, and the role of civil society. Based on the encouraging level of participation resulting from the discussion, both groups are planning a follow-up workshop on the same agenda.

IV. RESULTS AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS

As a result of NDI’s efforts:

- NDI staff managed to secure badges to observe their first local municipal election held in the province of Comilla. As a result, the staff was able to meet with the Chief Election Commissioner following the elections, presenting him with some observations and recommendations, of which could be incorporated without having to implement any new regulations or laws; and
- Received confidence and support from top party leaders and Prime Minister Hasina following presenting them with an outline of NDI’s programs.

V. EVALUATION

This quarter, NDI assisted civil society representatives in developing effective advocacy strategies while holding forums to facilitate discussion among representatives of the parliament secretariat, pro-democracy groups and academics, on ways to institutionalize a Citizens Relations Office. NDI is also conducting consultations with civil society organization (CSO)

representatives and committee chairs to plan hearings with members of parliament following parliamentary polls. By following up on these efforts and encouraging further reforms, NDI will continue to play a role in the strengthening of the national parliament, and improving of parliamentary functioning through building cooperation between political parties.

VI. FUTURE ACTIVITIES

- NDI, along with FEMA, will continue to hold round-table discussions that focus on advocacy and accountability in parliament and the role of civil society. Based on the encouraging level of participation resulting from the last discussion, both groups are planning a follow-up workshop on the same agenda;
- NDI will arrange for further consultations with embassy officials and USAID representatives to discuss other program ideas;
- NDI will continue to educate party activists about their rights and responsibilities will continue; and
- NDI will make recommendations to the Election Commission (EC) to help increase the legitimacy of the electoral process. One suggestion might be to have the EC present the government and the media with some reforms they think are necessary to organizing a transparent election. Meetings with the EC will continue on a regular basis as NDI observes other local elections in the weeks to come.